

Anthony Ware, *Context-Sensitive Development: How International NGOs Operate in Myanmar*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2012, 286 pp. ISBN 1-56549524-1 (paperback).

Since the military junta's rule ended in early 2011, Myanmar has been turning small steps into big ones, which should be positively reinforced by the international community. Today in Myanmar, new security threats are present and growing, and the traditional ones present new features. For the international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), the next decade will be crucial; dealing with emergent security threats is a difficult process without shortcuts.

In Myanmar, the preconditions for long-term human development are not in place. There is a limited mandate for international agencies to gain access to people and their communities in Myanmar. Therefore INGOs have to bypass governmental agencies and work to empower local communities and local NGOs of minority ethnic groups. At the same time, one-size-fits-all and non-contextual resolutions still dominate some international development projects in Myanmar. On the other hand, 'participatory development', which is most widely adopted by INGOs to ensure context-sensitivity, needs be theorized further.

How do INGOs contextualize themselves to local and national environments in Myanmar, which involve significant national and international tensions? This is an important question that has been overlooked by academics and policy makers dealing with Myanmar. In *Context-Sensitive Development: How International NGOs Operate in Myanmar*, Anthony Ware makes essential contributions to development theory and practical implementation of 'participatory context-sensitive development' by international development agencies. In the view of the author, INGOs are 'far better suited to current donor demands on assistance to Myanmar than multilateral development is' (p. 19).

On the basis of in-depth historical understanding and semi-structured interviews with professional elites from INGOs, the author emphasizes the importance of context-sensitive development in Myanmar, advances a new model of context-sensitive development and explores how INGOs should promote context-sensitive development in the complex context of Myanmar.

This book is composed of eight chapters, divided into three parts. Part One reviews the literature of development studies, establishes the theoretical framework of the book and analyzes the fundamental aspects of context-sensitive development, especially extending sensitivities to

difficult political contexts, that is, conflict-sensitive development, development in fragile, isolated states.

As the author highlights, though context-sensitive development has been accepted in development theory, 'the term "context" is rarely defined and is rarely connected to discussion of roles and dynamics such sensibility might imply' (p. 38). In addition, as the author notes, there are several weak points in promoting 'participatory development', such as whether the marginalized participants are 'sufficiently empowered to contextualize in relation to both local elites and the development agency', and whether participatory development 'minimizes or ignores the role agencies should play themselves in their dealings with stakeholders' (p. 67).

In the author's opinion, the model of participatory development is insufficient to explain the dynamics of international agencies' interaction with local actors. Therefore, after reviewing the literature on directed social change theories, the author extends the model of participatory development to adopt multiple levels of context, while the actors of each level would have space to innovate and fit the corresponding context. For example, 'local communities should act as primary decision makers at the micro-level of development', while 'local NGOs or civil society partners' act as primary actors 'at meso-levels' and 'INGOs at more macro-levels' (p. 227).

In Part Two, the author explores the sociopolitical and economic contexts of Myanmar and the Burmese elites from a historical perspective. Chapter three explains the history of Myanmar and Burmese elites in the sociopolitical context, and concludes that many Burmese military and political elites 'have long held altruistic motivations around which constructive international engagement on poverty alleviation and development priorities may proceed' (p. 102). In Chapter four, the author suggests that there are complex issues within the contemporary economic and sociopolitical context, including 'the persistence of traditional values, historical grievances and postcolonial sensitivities' (p. 141), which call for corresponding development approaches.

In Part Three, the author insists that INGOs should focus on context-sensitivity in two aspects: first, high-level effective participation in community development of Myanmar. Since the mandates most INGOs face prevent them from engaging in capacity building of local government, it would be more applicable to establish community-based organizations 'as a means of facilitating social sustainability beyond the direct involvement' (p. 165) of international agencies; The second aspect is the

contextualization in the interactions with stakeholders in Myanmar, including 'development approaches of partnership', 'capacity building', 'advocacy', 'rights-based approach' and 'accountability' (p. 196).

In Chapter seven, the author discusses the current scenario within which INGOs operate. In terms of the opinions of interview participants, INGOs not only have to deal with previous sanctions, restricted development assistance and limited mandates, but they also need to persuade Western governments and international donors. Next, the author analyzes the reasons why the humanitarian operations in Myanmar are restricted in multiple perspectives, including humanitarianism, international relations, political philosophy and development theory.

The concluding chapter synthesizes the contributions of this book: first, this book extends the participatory development approach and conceptualizes INGOs as consisting of two discrete actors: 'in-country INGO staff who have a field orientation, and INGO head office staff with a policy, branding, and global practice orientation' (p. 227). Second, this book extends conflict-sensitive development and finds that 'firmly grounding development in a historically informed in-depth understanding of the sociopolitical context is extremely relevant to Myanmar' (p. 229). Third, this book highlights the essential adaptations INGOs make to the conflict-sensitive and context-sensitive scenarios in Myanmar.

Context-Sensitive Development: How International NGOs Operate in Myanmar not only fills a gap in the literature of development theory and Myanmar studies, but also discovers several key areas requiring further research: further theorization on the roles of the actors in context-sensitive development, and examination of similarities and divergences in difficult contexts.

In short, this ground-breaking book will be a must-read for academics, students, policy makers and NGO staff who are interested in Myanmar studies, development theory and international relations. Moreover, this book is a highly recommended purchase for university libraries and anyone who is interested in knowing more about the NGOs and humanitarian operations in Myanmar.

Kai Chen

Post-doctoral Research Fellow

Centre for Non-Traditional Security and Peaceful Development Studies

College of Public Administration

Zhejiang University, China